

GAZELLE

Vol 21 no 6 – June 2006



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

*DNHG Membership
Renewals*

Undaunted by Summer

Speaker Coordinator **Angela Manthorpe** has risen (or in this case sunk) to the challenge of answering the British Museum's outstanding request for a specimen of the marine gastropod *Turbo radiatus*, for use in connection with DNA studies of the evolutionary relationships of this group of molluscs. Angela spotted and collected a specimen while she and Stephen were diving near Sir Abu Nu'air (see p.6). Collecting efforts on the East Coast had already turned up a Turbo species not previously recognised in the UAE, although it remains to be confirmed whether this represents a genuinely new species or an isolated population of a species known from Yemen.

Stephanie Darbyshire went through Wadi Bih last weekend and reported, "There has obviously been a lot of water damage as the road had been repaired in many places and is still somewhat degraded. The steep drop on the Dibba side is reduced to one narrow lane in patches with both the bank and the ditch eroding into the road. I certainly would say it is unsuitable for saloon cars whereas the last time I was through they could have managed. There were men working on the road and in one place we had to wait for a bulldozer

to move a pile of rubble off the road so that we could pass. On the sides of the road on the steeper bits there were quite deep washed out gullies and the flat stone-walled fields looked washed clean. The trees and plants looked very green and some were flowering. We had a wave through passport check at the first barrier and then a second more thorough check at the second barrier just before the climb."



Sandy Fowler sent this photo of a garden visitor in Ajijic. "He was a little put out when I appeared with my camera but circled around, settled down and let me catch this shot. I've seen at least 10 different species of moth in my garden in the past week, wingspans up to 10cm and possibly triggered by our recent showers. Looking forward to *Gazelle* as always, and I DO read more than just the shelling bits! Really fascinating snake report!"

Membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and helps pay for our lecture hall, publication and distribution of our monthly newsletter, the *Gazelle*, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.

Memberships taken up now will be good for the coming year, through to September 2007.

This month's Contributors

The Editor would like to thank the following for their reports and contributions:

Stephanie Darbyshire
Angela and Steve Manthorpe
Barbara Couldrey
Val Gondoux and Philippe Mueller
Sandy Fowler
Gary Feulner
Val Chalmers
Mohammed Arfan Asif

Under the patronage of H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan



End-of-Season Dinner

Our annual end-of-season dinner, photographic competition and quiz produced perhaps the best photographic entries so far, and it was difficult to choose just three...



The photographs will, if possible, be published in the next issue of *Gazelle*, and if you receive it online, you will see them in glorious colour.

The winners were:

1st Prize Roger Neal - Bourke's Luck Potholes (Received trophy (without vase!) plus MMI vouchers for Dh150/-)

2nd Prize Mohammed Arfan Asif - Small Green Bee Eater at Jadaf (Received MMI Vouchers for Dh100/-)

3rd Prize Mohammed Arfan Asif - Bonnet Macaque (Received DNHG Sweatshirt)

4th Prize Peter Jackson - Bedouin in Sinaw (Received MMI Voucher for Dh50/-)

N.B. MMI Vouchers are for the different MMI outlets in Dubai.



Peter Jackson, Roger Neal, Chairman Gary Feulner, Mohammed Arfan Asif

Quiz participants had to work their way through various phobias, -ologies, colour-coded local wildlife, snakes, architectural sites and phe-

nomena, scrambled fossil names and photo identifications (including several former DNHG Chairmen and Committee members). It was a close finish once again, with the winning teams just a point apart. The winners, who will set next year's quiz, were:

'The Giant Mayflies'
Simon & Lena Linton
Pam Linton
Larry & Camille Schwab
Gary Feulner

And the runners-up:
'Zibin'
Barbara van Meir
Paolo Orsini
Steve and Johanna Raynor
Rachel Raynor
Mohammed Arfan Asif

Book Review:

Emirates Heritage

A new addition to the DNHG library, courtesy of the Zayed Centre for Heritage and History, is two copies of *Emirate Heritage Vol. 1*, being the Proceedings of the 1st Annual Symposium on Recent Palaeontological and Archaeological Discoveries in the Emirates, Al Ain 2003, edited by Peter Hellyer and Dr. Michelle Ziolkowski.

This symposium has since become an annual event, and one which several DNHG members have attended. It is a forum for researchers working in the UAE to share their results and ideas with their colleagues. Vol. 1 includes papers on, *inter alia*, Miocene fossils and elephant trackways in the Western Region of Abu Dhabi; a summary of the Neolithic excavations at Jebel Buhais; excavation of prehistoric tombs at Qarn al-Harf in RAK; the Sufouh 2 site in Dubai Internet City; a reconstruction of the residence and mosque at Falayah, RAK; excavations at Bithnah, Fujairah; a study of a historic residence in Fujairah; and a description of various archaeological sites in the Dubai hinterland. *Thanks to Gary Feulner.*

Kalba's New Lagoon Now 'Open'

The artificial lagoon that was excavated in Kalba, inland of Khor Kalba, has now been opened to the sea (via Khor Kalba) and is permanently flooded to an estimated depth of about 5 meters. The associated cornice is nearly completed and one can imagine that pedal boats are sure to follow. Built mostly on what was surely considered waste ground – saline flats fringing the mangrove forest – the new lagoon is no doubt intended as an attractive amenity. Nevertheless, everything comes at a cost and nature lovers must hope that the cost to the adjacent Khor Kalba, one of the UAE's pre-eminent natural sites, will not be too high.

As it is, the new lagoon and cornice truncates the former north channel of the mangrove forest, essentially bisecting it. The northernmost half has been left to die and it appears slated to be land-filled for development. A moat has been dredged on the seaward side of the forest, making access relatively difficult to what was previously the easiest place to have a look at the Khor Kalba mangroves. Within the north channel forest, many of the older trees are largely leafless within, and with many dead limbs, but new leaves in the crowns may be indicative that at least a certain amount of recovery is underway.

In the two southern channels of the mangrove forest, no adverse effect of the new lagoon was evident in the course of a couple of recent visits. Among other things, two signature species of Khor Kalba - the white-collared kingfisher *Halcyon chloris kalbaensis* and the large mud creeper *Terebralia palustris*, both found in the wild in the UAE only at Khor Kalba - appeared to be present in good numbers. *Report by Gary Feulner*



Last tidbits for the season from the Northern Emirates

Great excitement on 18 May when, during a very early morning walk up Wadi Hafarah, we surprised three eagle owls (*Bubo bubo desertorum*). One flew closely over our heads and settled on a nearby ridge, resembling a 'sitting up' cat because of its ears, eyes and size.



Bubo bubo desertorum
Photograph Philippe Mueller

When it eventually lumbered off, we were about to continue our walk when we were startled by two more eagle owls flapping out of their little cave about 15 meters away! I thought the first bird could have been larger than the others, quite possibly a breeding family.

The same day, in Wadi Hakil, we were delighted to see and smell the abundant acacia tree (*Acacia tortilis*) in full bloom.



Bee on Acacia tortilis

This event had been prepared for by local farmers as smart new barasti beehive shelters had been built and were literally buzzing with bees – as were the trees.



Barasti beehive shelters



*Barasti shelters
Preparations for honey*

*Report by Barbara Couldrey and
bee photographs by Val Gondoux*

Maggots on the Beach

On the Bin Majid beach one morning in late March, Barbara Couldrey saw a curious sight. Thousands of maggot-type creatures, somewhat more than a centimetre long, were caterpillaring their way to the sea (low tide) from the top of the beach near rocks. On reaching the sea they were washed back up. Barbara at first saw no sign of any sizeable carcass on the shore, but a second visit revealed a dead turtle among the rocks. Dr. Richard Hornby was consulted but couldn't think of any marine organism that would meet this description – and didn't know why bona fide maggots (fly larvae) would be marching to the sea. Anne Millen may have inadvertently added a piece to the puzzle when she referred, in her IEW account of shelling at Rams beach, to the "maggot-ridden carcasses of rays" which often litter the beach, discarded by fishermen. There is clearly a potential niche for a fly that

lays its eggs in beach front carcasses. But how then do the larvae develop, and where? Pending answers, Barbara thoughtfully froze some specimens, then pickled them for dispatch to Dick Hornby. *Report by Gary Feulner*

News from Ajjic

Dr Sandy Fowler, who is now living in Mexico, has never been one to assume that there is nothing to do. He wrote recently of his winter walks in the hills above his little town. "I did the walk in January for two reasons. I wanted to explore that particular trail and I also wanted to test the comments I'd heard that "there was nothing much to see up there at this time of the year". I took more than twice as long as normal, and looked and absorbed, rather than saw. At first sight, the trail looked burnt and devoid of life.



The dried out path

There was indeed little evidence of animal or insect activity, and no signs of spring (the eternal optimist!) Even so, the patterns of the winter bark fascinated me, as did a teasel-top.

The contrast between tree and winter sky was beautiful, as were the clusters of winter berries (plant as yet unknown).





E.mail your reports to pvana@emirates.net.ae, (Arial 10 justified) or deliver them to Anne Millen on floppy disk at monthly meetings.



The gourds brought a nostalgic smile to my face with memories of similar clusters nestling in dune hollows.



For me the highlights of the walk were the butterfly gloriously camouflaged against the tree – if I hadn't been moving slowly, I'd have missed its flutter/settle manoeuvre and the juxtaposed flower and hive. I'd missed them in the morning with the sun at the wrong angle, but the afternoon sun highlighted them and gave me one of my better photos.



What I learned that day was that there can be more to mountains

than getting to the top, and that the getting there is sometimes more fun than the main event. I also learned that so often one looks, but does not see. The Swahili expression "Pole, pole" (slowly, slowly) covers it nicely — a good maxim for living life to the full.



Mexican humming bird in a clear blue sky

Thanks to Sandy Fowler for text and photographs.

Kuwait Natural History

I took advantage of business in Kuwait to spend a Friday in May touring a Kuwaiti nature reserve with Kuwait-based botanist Gary Brown, a former DNHG speaker who worked for several years with ERWDA in Abu Dhabi. The visit was an antidote for the common misconception that Kuwait is flat and boring from a natural history point of view. The site was the Sabah Al-Ahmed Nature Reserve in the Umm Ar-Rimam area on the north side of Kuwait Bay. This privately organised reserve comprises 300 sq. km. and has been fenced, with restricted access, for three years.

Kuwait has neither the mountains nor the deep sands of the UAE, but its rolling plains and low, dissected ridges are relatively well-vegetated, thanks to winter rains that are both more regular and somewhat heavier than in the UAE (averaging about 120mm per year historically and more than 160mm per year in recent years). My May 2006 visit was enhanced by recent rains that had obviously puddled in numerous areas on the plains. One result was abundant growth of grasses (especially *Stipa capensis* and *Cen-tropodia* sp.) that made the area

resemble steppe or prairie as much as "desert."

Most remarkable were the dhub. We saw at least a couple of hundred dhubs (*Uromastix aegyptia*), including colorful yellow-spotted juveniles, often with burrows spaced only 30-50m apart. Happily, this is apparently the state both inside and outside the reserve; Gary Brown said that the dhubs seem to be, if anything, even more common in less well vegetated areas.



Juvenile dhub,

Trees are extremely rare, although the desert thorn (*Lycium shawii*) can grow here as a rounded shrub more than 2m tall. Gary Brown suggests that treelessness is most likely the product of history – over-grazing and/or wood collecting – rather than reflecting the truly natural state. The few trees that exist are magnets for bird life. The famous "Tulha Tree", a lone *Acacia gerrardii* situated within the reserve, was a refuge for at least three kinds of shrike, three warblers and a male rock thrush.



Kuwait's famous Tulha Tree

Nearby, a single irrigated grove of mesquite (*Prosopis juliflora*) is a favorite site of Kuwaiti birdwatchers and photographers. We saw a number of species there, including two



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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Archaeology - Prof. John Fox
jfox@aus.ac.ae
(Temporarily away - hold your reports)

Birds - David Bradford
davebradford9@hotmail.com

Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi
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off: 06-5583 003
email: lankefi@emirates.net.ae

Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner
res 306 5570
fax 330 3550

Insects – Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
res 349 4816,
fax 340 0990
vmc@latifaschool.co.ae

Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Mammals & Seashells - Recorders needed!

The recorders are not necessarily scientific experts in their designated fields. In fact, most are not. However, they are interested and knowledgeable amateurs - please contact them if you have any interesting reports or queries.

The intention is that information will be channelled through to the *Gazelle* editor, so new information can be shared with all our readers.

firsts for me: the barred warbler and spotted crane. Equally remarkable were good views of a monitor lizard (*Varanus griseus*), which we were able to monitor ourselves as it made a small circuit of the area and drank from the puddles. At another site in the damp center of a broad pan, I added three more species new to me: the black-winged and collared pratincoles and the white-winged black tern.



Lindenia tetraphylla
Photograph Gary Feulner

Many of Kuwait's plants are species found in the UAE, but sometimes with differences in growth form (such as the desert thorn mentioned above) and habitat. Another example is the delicate *Scabiosa olivieri*, found only in high mountains in the UAE but on the plains in Kuwait. Others plants represent distinct species that are nevertheless close relatives of UAE plants. The presence of such "similar-but-different" organisms in differing but geographically contiguous environments is one of the phenomena that figured prominently in the thinking of early evolutionary theorists such as Alfred Russel Wallace. Examples are Kuwait's spiny *Astragalus spinosus* (which recalls the UAE's *A. fasciculifolius*) and Kuwait's *Ochradenus baccatus* (which recalls our *O. arabicus*).

Last but not least, my Kuwait visit gave me, quite unexpectedly, my first encounter with the Arabian lobetail (*Lindenia tetraphylla*), Arabia's largest perching dragonfly. Also present were many of the smaller, hovering desert darter (*Selysiotthemis nigra*). Both of these species were probably migrating into the area in response to the recent rains, as they have long been recognised to do.

Seen as road kill were red fox, little owl and long-eared hedgehog (the latter a species that does not seem to extend to the UAE, although there exists an enigmatic report from Al-Ain). Equally encouraging for the future is recent confirmation of the survival of caracal and porcupine in northern Kuwait, despite the destruction wrought by war and development. Several reputable books for laymen are available on the plants, insects and general natural history of Kuwait. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Thru the lens ...



A nature photographer always aspires to capture his subjects in the most ideal condition possible. This is based on established concepts; fundamentals of composition, commonly accepted approaches to a specific subject and the presenta-

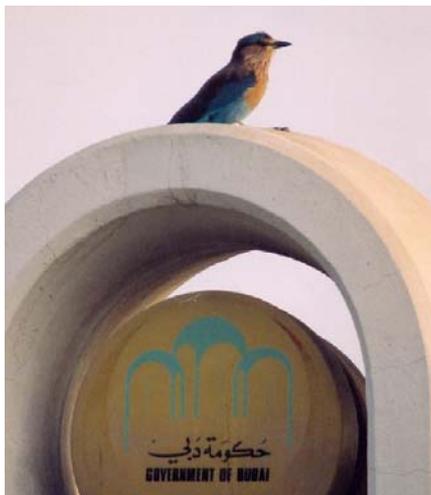


tion styles adopted by the masters.

Now how did Frans Lanting get that image? Everything seems to be in place. It is nature and not a studio where subject and props can be arranged as one pleases. In a studio everything is in control. The light is where we want and the shoot is paced according to our desires. But in nature, control is either very limited or impossible.

Every fraction of a second, nature is different and it does not repeat itself. This is its unique characteristic. Therefore, a nature photographer needs to be prepared to react instantaneously. He should have patience and perseverance, and approach the subject according to a plan. By this means, the photographer is able to predict the drama that could unfold before him.

We have seen so often that our subjects are not where they ideally should be. Capturing a bird on a man-made object is unacceptable in the definition of true wild life photography. One may argue that man-made objects may be a part of present day nature - I shall discuss this issue in a future column.



Take the example of this Indian roller, or blue jay, a migrant breeding species. One always preferred to perch on the DOHMS logo present on the compound of the hospital where I work. I waited patiently for it to get on something natural and it never did. This was his adapted environ and I could not

make a picture in the scope of the 'nature' definition!



Then there was an osprey, which was very cooperative, but did not leave its favoured perch, the Ras Al Khor Public Announcement Boards previously positioned in 21 spots. At last, I saw it catch a fish, only to land back on the same board. It stayed for quite a long time before it finally took off in the opposite direction, to my dismay.



What can I do when a wild bird just wouldn't leave the interlock and come over to the sand?



Another day, a crowned crane went from one lamp post to the other as I followed for quite some time on the Al Qoz road, but it never opted for a different perch! Now all these photographs are plain record shots of birds in the urban landscape, for illustrative purposes, and do not conform to the definition of true wild life photography. *Text & photographs by Mohammed Arfan Asif*

Sir Abu Nuair

We were invited recently to spend the weekend on board a friend's boat, with the destination being the island Sir Abu Nuair, approximately 70 km off the Abu Dhabi coast and 110 km from the entrance to Dubai Creek.



Sir Abu Nuair

The island (above) is a fairly low rise outcrop with an elevation less than 100m. Signs on the shore indicate that it is governed by Sharjah Emirate and there is a small military base on the island. Apparently there is also a shop but understandably visitors are not encouraged to explore, and from our mooring we could see little activity apart from the ongoing building of a new radio/telephone mast on one of the hills.



Angela on the dive boat

The main objective for our visit was to do some diving and snorkeling as the island is surrounded by magnificent hard corals (mostly branching table corals as well as large coral heads).

Underwater we found extensive shallows around the northern and eastern sides with depths in the 7m to 10m range for some considerable distance from shore. The table corals provide shelter to many smaller fish, including juveniles of the yellow bar angel fish, orange dottyback and assorted



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blennies and the whole area is alive with sergeant major damselfish, black spotted rubberlips, golden spot trevally and the bright orange Arabian butterflyfish.



Table coral

In addition we saw more two-bar bream than we have ever seen on the offshore wrecks or on the East Coast – our companion explaining that the Arabic name for the fish means 'Captain's daughter' because the black stripes on the fishes head resemble the burqa.



Coral heads and abundant fish

The island appears to be a popular weekend destination and we counted approximately 8 other boats anchored nearby on the South East side of the island – most of them large motor yachts – plus a small sailing yacht and a large trading dhow, possibly on its way to or from Bahrain.

Thanks to Steve and Angela Manthorpe for report and photographs.

Our Next Meetings

Please note that our next meeting, being the first after the summer break, will not be held on the first Sunday of the month which is our usual practice. To allow members to get back and settle their feathers, it will be held on Sunday, **September 17**. And then, because the October meeting would be too close, it too will be delayed a week to **October 8**. Pencil them in now!

Letters to the Editor

Do you have some comment, suggestion or query on natural history that you would like our members to know about or answer?

Please send your letter to any of the committee members listed, by fax or e-mail, or direct to the editor, Anne Millen.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

Lectures at Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, 7.30 for 8.00pm

Sep 17	TBA
Oct 08	TBA
Nov 05	Dr Michele Ziolkowski - Rock on Art

Field Trips (Members only, please. Details inside.)